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ABSTRACT

Ninety-three officers and enlisted men of the United States Army National Guard were surveyed for their communication attitudes in a study comparing rhetorical sensitivity to two organizational communication variables--leadership effectiveness (as a managerial skill) and position in an organizational hierarchy (rank). The survey measured the ways in which the subjects matched three communicator types: (1) the rhetorically sensitive person, one who generally accepts the variability of communication and interpersonal relationships and does not try to avoid stylized verbal behaviors; (2) the "noble self," one who sees any variation from personal norms as hypocritical and a denial of integrity; and (3) the "rhetorical reflector," who presents a different self for each person or situation. The results showed that subjects who scored high in rhetorical sensitivity were not rated significantly higher in leadership effectiveness than individuals who scored low in rhetorical sensitivity. However, rhetorical sensitivity did relate to rank, so that scores for rhetorical sensitivity increased across groups from enlisted men through sergeants to officers. Other results showed that sergeants tended to score higher in noble self than officers and enlisted men, but lower in rhetorical reflector than the others, while the enlisted men tended to score relatively high in both areas. (RL)

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AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN RHETORICAL SENSITIVITY, LEADERSHIP EFFECTIVENESS, AND RANK IN A MILITARY ORGANIZATION

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Hart and Burks claim that the rhetorical approach to the study of communication, in which communicative behavior is viewed as purposive, facilitates human understanding and social cohesion.[2] In their presentation of what rhetoric-in-action can be, they offer five characteristics of rhetorical sensitivity which if effectively utilized in communication with others "can help men make the most out of their social interactions."[3] The rhetorically sensitive person is said to attempt (1) to accept role taking as part of the human condition; (2) to avoid stylized verbal behavior; (3) to undergo the strain of adaptation; (4) to distinguish between all information and information acceptable for communication; (5) to understand that an idea can be rendered in multiform ways.[4] They add that the rhetorically sensitive person is "an undulating, fluctuating entity, always unsure, always guessing, continually weighing (potential communication decisions)."[5]

One gains further perspective into the rhetorical sensitivity concept by comparing it to the alternative "noble self" and "rhetorical reflector" typologies. Noble selves "see any variation from their personal norms as hypocritical, as a denial of integrity, as a cardinal sin," while rhetorical reflectors "have no self to call their own. For each person and for each situation they present a new self."[6]

The concept of rhetorical sensitivity and its alternative typologies are of interest to communication researchers. For example, most recently, rhetorical sensitivity has been studied in academic,[7] family,[8] and organizational settings.[9]

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The primary purpose of this study was to examine the relationship between rhetorical sensitivity and two organizational communication variables, namely (1) leadership effectiveness (as a managerial skill) and (2) rank (as a position in an organizational hierarchy). A secondary purpose was to collect RHETSEN data in the natural setting of an actual organization.

Based on the attitude dimensions of rhetorical sensitivity, persons scoring high in rhetorical sensitivity are expected to emerge as more effective leaders. This prediction is based on the idea that the adaptation demands of the leadership role attracts those high in rhetorical sensitivity. Conversely, the rigidity of noble self attitudes could hinder the creative visionary processes normally associated with those who seek leadership. Finally, the "Yes Men," those scoring high in rhetorical reflector, are less likely to seek leadership roles.

Another interesting possibility is that the leadership role and rank in an organization alter the individual's communication attitudes. Consideration of the demands inherent in leadership roles and rank suggests that the occupants must adapt to situational constraints to be effective. Therefore, the role and rank requirements may be viewed as influencial processes that alter one's perspective on communication resulting in increased rhetorical sensitivity as a coping mechanism.

Methodology

Subjects

Ninety-three infantry-trained males who participated as subjects (Ss) in this study were members of the US Army Michigan National Guard. They consisted of 14 officers (who function at the management level), 31 sergeants (noncommissioned officers who function at the foreman or supervisory level), and 48 enlisted

men (who function as laborers at the worker level). All drill as soldiers one weekend per month and attend a two week summer camp annually. All served at lease six months active duty. Although the total number of Ss was 93, the number (n) used in the analyses varied in some cases depending on the rank of the Ss involved in a part of the study or missing data for a particular analysis.

The Michigan Army National Guard was selected for the organizational context of the present study for two reasons. First, an ongoing organization with hierarchical depth was needed. In the Guard, several ranks were clearly differentiated. Secondly, a hierarchically structured organization which also permitted and included different grades of leadership effectiveness was also needed. Again, in the Guard, several degrees of leadership were represented.

Procedure

During a regularly scheduled weekend drill assembly the RHETSEN scale was administered to all 93 members present for duty. An authorized person obtained from the Enlisted Efficiency Report forms the rank and leadership scores for the sergeants while preserving their anonymity. Ratings for the officers were obtained directly from the officers themselves.

Leadership Ratings

The Enlisted Efficiency Report forms included ten duty performance traits such as "displays ability to initiate action without direction from others" and "sets a good example for personal behavior of others." The Officer Efficiency Report Forms included 16 professional attributes such as "Did this officer seek responsibility?" and "Did this officer's personal conduct set the proper example for his subordinates?" Enlisted and officer efficiency reports are made out annually on all sergeants and officers by their immediate supervisor (rater) and

another superior once removed (indorser). Individuals are rated on leadership in the form of report scores as well as other factors related to job proficiency and eligibility for promotion. After being reviewed by an even higher authority, the efficiency report is shown to the person being rated and then filed permanently. The rated person's future in the Guard (retention and promotion) depends on the ratings received on the efficiency report.

Due to the nature of their positions and jobs, enlisted men were not required to be rated. Therefore, enlisted efficiency reports were not available for the 48 enlisted men who participated in other aspects of the study.

RHETSEN Scale

Hart and his colleagues have devised a means to identify rhetorically sensitive persons and their alternative typologies.[10] The 40 item paper-and-pencil RHETSEN scale is administered to subjects as "a communication survey."[11] Reliability and validity data are presented by Hart et al.

Analysis

Initially, means and standard deviations were obtained for officers, sergeants, and enlisted men compared to norms available on rhetorical sensitivity. Hart et al. reported the following norms: rhetorical sensitivity, 31.8 (± 7.5); noble self, 15.1 (± 6.3); and rhetorical reflector, 7.0 (± 3.8).[12] In addition, two groups of sergeants (high vs low in rhetorical sensitivity) were tested for differences in leadership scores according to their official efficiency ratings. The same was done for two groups of officers. The differences were tested for significance using t-tests at the .05 level of statistical significance. Finally, leadership scores were correlated with rhetorical sensitivity using Pearson r for sergeants and officers separately.

Rhetorical sensitivity means were as follows: Officers, 32.43 (n=14); sergeants, 28.52 (n=31), enlisted men, 27.81 (n=48). There appears to be a trend as the mean rhetorical sensitivity scores increase hierarchically from enlisted men, through sergeants, to officers. In fact, only three enlisted men scored high (one standard deviation above Hart's normative mean), and no sergeants scored that high. Meanwhile, 21 enlisted men and 10 sergeants scored low (one standard deviation below Hart's normative mean).

Rater leadership scores were compared to indorser leadership scores for sergeants and offficers separately. No significant differences were found using the t-test for independent samples at the .05 level of significance (df=58 for sergeants and 20 for officers).[13] For officers, rater scores correlated highly with indorser ($r=.64$, $p < .05$), while for sergeants, rater scores correlated very highly with indorser scores ($r=.98$, $p < .05$). Since rater leadership scores correlated with indorser leadership scores, and because there were nonsignificant differences between the two sets of data, only the rater scores were used in subsequent comparisons with rhetorical sensitivity.

Nine sergeants who scored high were compared to nine who scored low in rhetorical sensitivity. The leadership mean for sergeants in the high group was 19.00 (n=9) and in the low group, 19.89 (n=9).[14] Since only two officers scored high, and two scored low, they were the only Ss used in the analysis for officers. The leadership mean for officers in the high group was 69.00 (n=2) and in the low group, 67.50 (n=2). The difference between highs and lows were not significant for either set of data. In addition, the correlation between rhetorical sensitivity scores and leadership scores (rater) was low for both sets of data (sergeants, $r=-.12$, $p < .05$; officers, $r=.46$, $p > .05$).

Further analyses of the data were made to determine the noble self and rhetorical reflector scores for the Ss. The 14 officers averaged 12.79 (±6.60) on the noble self scale and 7.50 (±4.58) on the rhetorical reflector scale. The 31 sergeants scored 16.00 (±5.88) on the noble self scale and 7.39 (±4.26) on the rhetorical reflector scale. The 48 enlisted men scored 15.56 (±6.55) on the noble self scale and 9.02 (±4.24) on the rhetorical reflector scale.

Discussion

Before discussing the main findings of this study, it should be noted that the sergeants and enlisted men who participated as Ss in this study scored relatively low in rhetorical sensitivity (compared to Hart's normative data). One might conclude that they were generally low in rhetorical sensitivity with few, if any, scoring high. On the other hand, one might argue that Hart's normative data which was based on over 3000 university students may not be indicative of either the general population or members of the Michigan Army National Guard.

One of the main findings of this study was that individuals who scored high in rhetorical sensitivity were <u>not</u> rated significantly higher in leadership effectiveness than individuals who scored low in rhetorical sensitivity. These nonsignificant findings are possibly due to the small number of Ss used in the comparisons. In addition, due to the importance of the officer and enlisted efficiency reports for the rated person's future in the Guard, the ratings may be inflated by factors other than leadership effectiveness. For example, a sergeant or officer who is a weak leader may receive a high rating on leadership because his men performed well in training.

continues to experience the need for a strong sense of self (noble self), but when the individual reaches the higher ranks, one finds situational sensitivity, flexibility, and adaptability (rhetorical sensitivity) most important.

In summary, the purpose of this study was to compare rhetorical sensitivity to two organizational communication variables, particularly (1) leadership effectiveness (as a managerial skill) and (2) rank (as a position in an organizational hierarchy) in an actual organization - the US Army, Michigan National Guard. Although this study did not find a strong relationship between rhetorical sensitivity and leadership effectiveness (as measured by official efficiency reports), it did find a stronger relationship (positive) between rhetorical sensitivity and rank. It was theorized that higher ranks require greater integration of subordinate rolls (tasks, skills, and jobs) and more impression management ("politicking") than lower ranks. Thus, rhetorical sensitivity is especially important to those who wish to progress within an organization. Finally, noble self and rhetorical reflector analyses of the RHETSEN data revealed that as enlisted men progress up through the ranks to sergeant, rhetorical reflector decreases, and as they progress to the rank of officer, noble self decreases.

It was found that rhetorical sensitivity increased across groups from enlisted men, through sergeants, to officers. Thus, in this study, rhetorical sensitivity related more to rank than to leadership effectiveness. Since there is no reason to believe that rank and leadership ratings are related, it is not surprising that rhetorical sensitivity related with one and not the other.[15]

Why did rhetorical sensitivity relate positively to hierarchical levels within a military organization? There are at least two explanations. First, the higher the rank, the more interpersonal competence is required for effective performance at that level. A worker's role is relatively simple; he masters his job alone, and maintains relatively simple relationships with his co-workers. His manager, however, must be capable of assimilating the many diverse roles of those who work for him. An executive must be capable of assimilating the complex roles of many different managers who work for him. Secondly, the higher the rank, the more important "politicking" becomes. Whereas lower level job success is usually assessed by concrete measures of productivity, job success at higher levels depends more on impression management, public relations, and ability to work with people.

The present study also found that sergeants tended to score higher in noble self than officers and enlisted men, but lower in rhetorical reflector than the others, while the enlisted men tended to score relatively high in both areas. These findings suggest that as enlisted men progress up through the ranks to sergeant, rhetorical reflector as a personality trait tends to decrease, and as they progress on to the rank of officer, noble self tends to decrease. This also suggests that in an organization like the Michigan Army National Guard, rhetorical reflectors exist mainly at the lowest ranks. As one makes rank, the individual

Footnotes

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[2]Roderick P. Hart and Don M. Burks, "Rhetorical Sensitivity and Social Interaction," Speech Monographs, 39 (1972), 75-91. For a critique of Hart's and Burk's arguments against "the expressive school," see Alan L. Sillars, "Expression and Control in Human Interaction: Perspective on Humanistic Psychology," Western Speech, 38 (1974), 269-277.

[3]Ibid., p. 75.

[4]Ibid., p. 76.

[5]Ibid., p. 91.

[6]Donald Darnell and Wayne Brockriede, Persons Communicating (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1976), p. 176.

[7]Gary Shulman, "The Effects of Training on Rhetorical Sensitivity in the College Classroom." (Unpublished Paper, Central States Speech Association, Chicago, April, 1980); Marcy L. Krugel and Gary M. Shulman, "The Relationship Between Rhetorical Sensitivity and the Sex, I.Q., and Academic Level of High School Students," Michigan Speech Association Journal, 14 (1979), 114-119.

[8]Gary M. Shulman and Dudley D. Cahn, "The Relationship Between Rhetorical Sensitivity and Styles of Coping with the Loss of a Spouse." (Unpublished Paper, Central States Speech Association, Chicago, April, 1980).

[9]Robert Carlson, "Rhetorical Sensitivity and the Nursing Profession." (Unpublished Paper, Central States Speech Association, Chicago, April, 1980); Linda McCallister, "Verbal Reprimanding Among Superiors: A Profile of the Noble Self." (Unpublished Paper, Central States Speech Association, Chicago, April, 1980).

[10]Roderick K. Hart, Robert E. Carlson, and William F. Eadie, "Attitudes Toward Communication and the Assessment of Rhetorical Sensitivity," Communication Monographs, 47 (1980), 1-22.

[11]Ibid., pp. 6-7.

[12]Ibid., p. 8.

[13]Each S was rated twice, once by a rater and again by an indorser. Both scores were entered on the efficiency reports along with an average between the two. Since the rated person was the same stimulus object for both rater and indorser, no significant differences between rater scores and indorser scores were expected. Since the two ratings were done by separate individuals, even though the person being rated was the same for both rater and indorser, t-tests for independent samples were used.

[14]Officer efficiency reports have a maximum leadership score of 70, while enlisted efficiency reports have a maximum score of 25.

[15]"An executive or manager does not necessarily possess leadership qualities because of his or her particular designated position." See Jerry W. Koehler, Karl W. E. Anatol, and Ronald L. Applbaum, Organizational Communication (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1976), p. 134.